

A Sanitation Workers' Protest

Brought Dr. King to Memphis

This is the last of 10 installments from the book, "The Days of Martin Luther King Jr."

By Jim Bishop

Chapter X

The year 1966 started by staring coldly at Martin Luther King. The bus boycott was a decade behind him and Dr. King was laden with honors, but a missionary is no better than his most recent convert.

"Chicago," Dr. King said. The SCLC had made timid forays into the North before, but this would be a full-scale campaign. The directors were reluctant, but the president had pointed to a map and said, "Chicago." So that would be the next target.

Chicago was a complex and contradictory city when it came to race relations. It had no segregation laws; it had a huge and politically potent black population; Chicago had a black congressman; it had black aldermen and black ward leaders; it had black banks; black insurance companies; black policemen; not least, it had the Rev. Jesse Jackson browbeating white shop owners into hiring more and more blacks; it had an old-line Democratic mayor, Richard J. Daley, who had the black vote in his hip pocket. On the other hand, most of Chicago's more than 900,000

blacks lived in ghettos, working at inferior jobs for less pay. Beyond the ghettos were the Chicago suburbs, some of the most racist areas in the United States.

King decided that he could understand Chicago's problems better if he lived in the ghetto. His advance agents rented four rooms for him in an old tenement in the Lawndale slum section. The landlord hastily had the rooms freshly repainted, had the heating system fixed, and fumigated the apartment.

At City Hall two policemen saluted as he went in to be welcomed to the city of Chicago by Mayor Daley. The mayor was not effusive; he was polite. All city departments, he said, had been ordered to cooperate with King.

"I am confident," the mayor told the press of City Hall, "that there will not be any reason for breaking the law."

Next, King drove out to see Elijah Muhammad and made peace with him. It is possible that Dr. King feared the Muslims of Chicago and what they might do to him, but this is doubtful. Whatever the reason, Muhammad did not come to him; he went to Muhammad. When the meeting was over, Elijah made no announcement. King did. "The time has come when we, the Negroes, must see our mutual problems. It is not the time for us to be fighting each other."

The reaction was bewil-

derment. The Muslim fundamental principle was to separate the races; the SCLC's was to bring them together. One was violent; one nonviolent.

The campaign was almost a month in being and had not moved. There was no explosion. Dr. King was feeling his way around a big tough city. But he was in the wrong place. There were 300,000 blacks on the West Side where he lived. There were more than 600,000 living on the South Side, where he was seldom seen.

The spell was broken in the middle of February. It began with street fights and shouting. By the third night, roving gangs, looters, and snipers to the number of 5,000 were working the West Side. A thousand policemen were ordered into the area.

Gov. Kerner sent 1,500 National Guardsmen, with carbines and bayonets, into the area. Dr. King drove from one area to the next in a car, preaching nonviolence through a rolled-down window, but the people paused only long enough to point with wonderment and shout, "Look! Martin Luther King!" before they returned to their work.

The three-day riots did enormous damage and broke the solid image of black leadership into fragments, so that some favored Daley and others favored King. The riots stopped when the National Guardsmen were told, "If you are fired on, shoot to kill."

Daley won re-election in



Associated Press

Expanding his interests, Dr. King joined Dr. Benjamin Spock in an anti-Vietnam march in Chicago's south side.

Chicago. The forces opposed to Martin Luther King became vocal. The Rev. Henry Mitchell of the North Star Missionary Baptist Church convened with fifteen other ministers, who said they represented 50,000 blacks. Mitchell told the press that Dr. King's marches "created hate." King, he stressed, was an "outsider" whose work had failed in Chicago and he advised the doctor to "stay in Alabama."

In Oakland and San Francisco Bay area a group of supermillitants organized in October, 1966, and called themselves the Black Panther Party. They owed the name to Stokely Carmichael, but the mystic idea of a black nation within a white one was entirely their own. It was a black Ku Klux Klan.

The rise of the Black Panthers did not improve Dr. King's disposition. The movement was beyond his control. Nor did it elate him that on the opposite end of the spectrum, Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts was elected to the United States Senate. Brooke's origins related to the black middle class, which as far as the average black is concerned, is closer to the White Establishment than to the Black.

The trial and torture of the mind continued when Dr. King saw the "confidential report" of the Chicago Freedom Movement. Daley and his archbishop and his real estate boards had made solemn commitments, but black members of the Chicago Freedom Movement had tested them and found them not wanting, but totally absent.

James Earl Ray escaped from prison. On Sunday morning, April 27, 1967, he reported for duty in the bakery. That night, he was free. It was not a newsworthy event, even in Jefferson City, Mo.

Ray was now thirty-nine

years old, and it bothered him that every time he tried to escape the State of Missouri had added more time to his sentence. He had spent thirteen years behind bars—a long time for a young convict.

As a baker he was permitted to eat in the prison kitchen. He devoured six eggs, because he figured that he might have to hide inside or outside the prison for a while. He also had a transistor radio, soap, a mirror, a comb, a score of candy bars, and a razor. He wasn't expected for duty until 11 a.m., so he allowed himself from 8 a.m. on to implement his plan. He donned a white shirt he had hidden and green prison slacks which he had dyed black. On top of those, he wore the green prison uniform. Then he walked out into the warming sunshine on the loading dock and looked around.

Ray opened a storage box for the bread baked for the inmates of a nearby prison farm. He sat on the fresh loaves of bread and crushed them. A prisoner pushed the top back down on the box. It was loaded onto a truck with the other storage boxes and was passed through the tunnel by the guard. As soon as the truck was off prison grounds, Ray began to pry the lid loose.

He had \$300, an ID card, and a Social Security number issued to him as "John L. Raynes" years earlier. The prisoner hid under a railroad overpass, listening to his transistor radio. There wasn't a word about the triumphant escape of James Earl Ray. He couldn't believe it. Neither could the warden, who was sure that Ray, once more, was somewhere inside the prison.

The prison's response to the escape was to reduce the size of the bread boxes. It offered a reward for the capture of James Earl Ray: \$50.

On the seventh day James Earl Ray arrived by bus in Chicago, a furtive, frightened man and found a job as dishwasher in a restaurant in Winnetka, Ill.

Riots had broken out in many cities the summer of 1967. It amounted to mass

crime in the name of civil rights. Martin Luther King kept careful track of the disorders. "People expect me to have answers," he said, "and I don't have any answers."

The "Burn, baby, burn" credo was in the ascendancy; King and his philosophy of nonviolence were history.

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Someone gave James Earl Ray \$2,000 and a New Orleans phone number. He was told to call that number from time to time for orders. Whatever the orders were, James Earl Ray understood the nature of the assignment, because his Birmingham boss told Ray that he would get an additional \$12,000 in cash and a visa to a foreign country, including an escape route through Canada. The ex-con must have been happy—perhaps for the first time in his life—because he was making that "one big lick." He had lots of cash, a good car, no work to do, and could tour Mexico and return to the United States with identification as "Eric S. Galt of Birmingham, Alabama."

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On Dec. 17 Ray made his phone call and met his man in New Orleans. One can but deduce from what occurred later that Ray was told that the job he must do would have to wait two or three months. He was also ordered to change his place of residence in Los Angeles and to remain there and await further instructions.

He was handed \$2,500 in \$20 bills. Whoever was investing in Ray as a gunman now had expended a total of \$8,500 in his future. He was also reminded that when the job was satisfactorily completed, he would get an additional \$12,000 and a passport to a "safe" country. Ray asked what would be a "safe" country. The answer was Rhodesia.

On Dec. 28, 1967, "Eric S. Galt" sat at a typewriter and typed a letter. It was

addressed to American Southern Africa Council in Washington. It began: "THE LOCAL JOHN BIRCH SOCIETY PROVIDED ME WITH YOUR ADDRESS." The letter acknowledged that the United States did not issue passports to Rhodesia, but the applicant was interested in emigrating to Rhodesia. Could they please tell him now this could be arranged?

There was little early morning light in Memphis on Jan. 31, 1968. The city was drenched by heavy rains. The supervisor of the sanitation Department called the garbage trucks back to their depots. The collection of refuse would have to wait until Thursday.

On Friday, Memphis was cold and dry. Mayor Henry Loeb's auditing department had made up the weekly paychecks for municipal employees. The blacks frowned at what they got. It was less than usual. When they asked, they were told that they were being paid for two hours' work on Wednesday—that's all. It hurt, but they supposed it was fair. A few of them talked with white garbage men in the hall. The whites had been paid for a full day. This was not fair.

The issue dragged for a week. Lincoln's Birthday, the black union went out on strike. The municipal attitude was that the workers could come back to the trucks or starve. As always, the white structure misgauged the anger and courage of the black man.

Eleven days later the NAACP and James Lawson led a march of protest down Main Street. It was peace-

ful. Sanitation workers held placards delineating their eight demands on Memphis, pleading for support. A solitary police car in low gear followed the line of marchers moving slowly ahead as the driver inched the car to the right, herding the marchers tightly to the curb. As the vehicle neared the front of the line, the car stopped. Several policemen jumped out. Two grabbed a black man. A third one sprayed a can of Mace, an irritant which causes temporary blindness and skin rash. The other policemen ran into the ranks.

Most of the blacks of Memphis did not believe that the strike was a racial matter until a police superior ordered the Mace attack. Overnight, the black ministers and their congregations were converted. This was not a union disagreement; it was a racial fight for life.

Martin Luther King was in Jamaica with his wife when the garbage men's strike started, and he knew nothing of it. His schedule picked up soon after. He was in Birmingham by Feb. 15; on Feb. 23 he was in New York; he was due in Miami for a ministerial conference the following morning. Dr. King was running harder, faster, more breathlessly than ever. The following week he was again in Miami for a series of meetings arranged by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to fuse this ministerial power, to give it direction and purpose. When the last meeting was concluded, the Rev. Sam Kyles sought King. "Martin," said Kyles, "you know we have a garbage men's



United Press International

Dr. King addresses 12,000 during a sanitation workers' strike that brought him to Memphis several times.

strike in Memphis." King looked up, smiling. "You may have to come and help us out," Kyles said. This was jest, or as Kyles said later, "a half jest." He did not expect Dr. King to abandon his proposed march in Washington for the problems of one city.

"Sure," the pastor said. "If you don't get it settled, I'd be glad to go to Memphis." But Dr. King was thinking out loud with his staff. His impression was

that the Memphis strike would be over quickly.

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On St. Patrick's Day James Earl Ray stopped in the main post office in Los Angeles and filled out a change of address card. "Eric S. Galt" stated that all mail should be forwarded to him at "General Delivery, Atlanta, Ga." On the same day, in the same city, Dr. King addressed the communicants of the Second Baptist Church. In the evening,

he was on a plane bound for Memphis.

Memphis was quiet when Dr. King arrived. After a short conference with Lawson, Kyle, and other leaders, he went to the Mason Street Temple to speak. There had been talk of a general one-day strike in Memphis to bring Mayor Loeb to the bargaining table. King stepped onstage to the roaring acclaim of 15,000 people.

He told the people that they ought to have a one-day stoppage — a complete stoppage — of all work in Memphis. They went wild. He went wild and went beyond what he had planned to do. "You arrange a march for that day," he shouted, "and I'll come back to Memphis to lead it."

"Friday!" they yelled. "Friday!" he shouted back. But by Friday twelve inches of snow blocked the streets of Memphis, and the march was reset for March 28.

On the twentieth, James Earl Ray was headed for Meridian, Tuscaloosa, and Birmingham. He met his man at the Statite; Dr. King was across town at the Gaston Motel. The next morning Ray said he was ordered to Atlanta, but by mistake, so he says, he drove south to Montgomery. Having discovered the error, there was no reason to compound it by driving sixty miles farther off course to a little town like Selma.

It is possible that Ray and King passed each other on

the road, because King was speaking at Linden, Ala.

On the evening of the twenty-third, the Smiler left Birmingham with his mentor and drove to Atlanta. Ray spent a week in the small Atlanta motel. He spent time studying a street map of Atlanta. In pencil he circled places designated as the home of Dr. Martin Luther King, the headquarters building of the SCLC, the Ebenezer Baptist Church, and a parking lot in the Capitol Homes public housing development.

On Sunday, the thirty-first, the map was discarded. The boss had arrived, and he ordered James Earl Ray to pack and clear out. The two men drove to Birmingham. Ray was given \$700 in cash and told to purchase a "large-bore deer rifle."

Within a few days, he was on his way to Memphis. Within a few days, Martin Luther King, dejected as never before because of the violence taking place in Memphis, was also on his way to that city to stay at the Lorraine, to repair his image as a nonviolent man. Across a weedy backyard, with the aid of rifle sights, the loser faced the loser for a moment James Earl Ray achieved his "one big lick," only to be chased and caught and sentenced to spend the rest of his life in prison. The man who dreaded to be kept in prison was free at last.

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Police escort James Earl Ray after his conviction in Dr. King's assassination.